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**Matters of Materiality in Byzantium. The Archangel Gabriel in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople**

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## **Matters of Materiality in Byzantium. The Archangel Gabriel in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople**

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**Abstract:** this article considers questions of materials and materiality in the context of the very large Byzantine mosaic of the Archangel Gabriel in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. It looks at the ways in which the materials of mosaics affected and affect the appearance of the image, and discusses how this sits with Byzantine conceptions of angels as both embodied and disembodied beings.

**Keywords:** mosaic, angels, Gabriel, materials

The question of the relationships between matter – what something is made from – and materiality – the quality of being material or even of being matter – is a particularly apposite one for medieval art. Medievalists have been conscious for a long time that an object matters as much for its physical qualities as for its aesthetic appearance. The so-called ‘material turn’ in art history, the foregrounding of ‘materiality’ as a theoretical and methodological approach, was more of a labelling and categorising of an approach used within the study of medieval art for some considerable time than a new understanding about works of art.<sup>1</sup> Medievalists are well-aware that in the supposed ‘era before art’, things mattered as things, that a silver vessel may have had the same form as a glass one, for example, but that it had a different appearance, conditioned both by its material and the condition of that material.<sup>2</sup> Where the ‘material turn’ says that objects are mediated by their properties, medievalists have never really had a problem with recognising that the silver vessel will weigh more than the glass one, and will be less fragile and easier to handle, and will have had a different function and value because of its medium. We are also sensitive to the connotations of the medium from which an object is made matter: what it meant to make a silver vessel rather than a glass one; what that tells us about costs, values, patronage; and also about attitudes to and perceptions of silver and glass.<sup>3</sup>

So in some ways, the attention paid to materiality in other areas of art history perhaps allowed medievalists to be more confident about work on ‘the objecthood’ of manuscripts, bowls, reliquaries, altar frontals, chasubles, retables, and the like, and to use more confidently what is understood about the qualities of the object as object to consider its ‘meaning’. But whilst it is the case that some of the ‘meaning’ of an object resides in the object itself, some of that meaning derives from the object’s function and use, and some from the audience’s perception. As has been said before, a reliquary is an object that holds relics: it derives its meaning as a reliquary from its contents and its use.<sup>4</sup> In theory, anything can become a reliquary if relics are put into it. Another aspect of the material turn was highlighted by Michael Ann Holly in her claim that materiality is the point at which matter and the imagination meet.<sup>5</sup> Although the interpretation offered here may not have been what Holly intended, I have found her comment thought-provoking in considering the interrelationship of objects with the sacred, and the question of how the material could become divine.

Holly’s belief is an interesting one in the context of secular objects, but that is another story. Here, my focus lies with religious images, and with one in particular, the ninth-century mosaic of the Archangel Gabriel in the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Fig. 1). Gabriel is significantly different from most of the objects

discussed in terms of their materiality. Such objects are usually portable; they are things that can be carried about, moved, transported and touched, entities with which viewers can engage directly with the materiality of the item in front of them or held in their hands. In contrast, the mosaic of Gabriel is just under 5 metres high and about 3 and a half metres wide and occupies a space about 17 metres square.<sup>6</sup> It is also located about thirty metres above the ground in Hagia Sophia. In both scale and distance from its audience, this mosaic is not an object whose materiality has been of first consideration.

But Gabriel's materiality matters in two key ways for understanding the interaction of matter and materials: the collision of matter and the imagination in an image; and the way in which this particular image is as much mediated, as much conditioned, by its physical materiality as any other object. The image of Gabriel is no exception to the concept that medieval religious objects were always a point at which the material and the divine came together, the moment when matter became transformed from base man-made materials into representations of the holy that were, on some level, holy themselves.

The mosaic is part of the ninth-century programme of the apse which places a seated Mother of God, her Child on her knee, in the apse semidome, with two flanking angels in the soffits of the bema. As a mosaic image, the archangel is a very sophisticated and cleverly constructed piece of work. It is made from a mixture of glass and stone tesserae. The range of colours and materials present few surprises but raise some interesting material questions.

A number of types of stone were used including white, pink and grey Proconnesian marble, a purple-grey granite and a slate-grey rock from Beykoz, a district of Istanbul.<sup>7</sup> These are all local materials; it is more than likely that all of the stone used in making the image was obtained in Constantinople itself, either from local sources or as off-cuts, pieces that had been left over from other work in decorative stone. The glass tesserae are a different matter. Where they came from, either as glass or as coloured tesserae, is unknown. It is unlikely that the raw glass was made in Constantinople and possibly it was not even made within the Empire itself: there is almost no surviving evidence for Byzantine primary glass making.<sup>8</sup> Where the raw glass was coloured and cut into tesserae is equally mysterious. It may have been coloured locally, possibly even on site, but it may just as well have been brought in from elsewhere in the Empire, or even further afield. It may have been scavenged from other mosaics or from left-over stockpiles of tesserae: Basil I, one of the emperors responsible for the apse mosaic, is said later in his reign to have taken mosaics and marbles from one church for use in another, and his son, Leo VI, is said to have stored supplies of tesserae for future use in yet another church.<sup>9</sup>

These two stories imply that those making the mosaics did not necessarily have a free range and choice of colours and materials but may have had to make do with what was available. This is further suggested by the limited variety of colours used: essentially gold, some silver and red, together with shades of blue, olives, greens and browns. Tellingly, there are places where terracotta tesserae smeared with red paint are used in place of glass, notably for the angel's buskins, which are made of a mixture of red glass and tesserae painted red. This practice suggests a dearth of red glass tesserae. Another colour lacking in the glass is white: the whites of the mosaic are almost uniformly stone.

That this is a restricted palette is highlighted by a juxtaposition of the Hagia Sophia mosaic with another image of the Mother of God and Child flanked by archangels from a very different church. In contrast to the imposing church of Hagia

Sophia, the church of the Panagia Angeloktistos at Kiti on Cyprus is minute and roughly constructed.<sup>10</sup> But its mosaic bears comparison, notably in the selection of colours employed. In contrast to her image clothed in blue in Hagia Sophia, at Kiti, Mary is shown dressed in robes made largely from red glass. Red glass is also used in several other places in the mosaic, including the angels' wings and the border. There are obvious expanses of silver at Kiti, most obviously in the angels' haloes, whilst in Hagia Sophia, silver is used sparingly. The issue here is that both red and silver glass were tricky to make and consequently costly to employ. Red glass is well-known for having been difficult for medieval craftsmen to manufacture, which presumably made it both rare and expensive.<sup>11</sup> Time and again, the reds in mosaics are not glass but terracotta or tile or brick or even stone or other tesserae painted red, as is the case at Hagia Sophia with the shoes of both Gabriel and indeed Mary herself.<sup>12</sup> In the case of silver, because silver is a less malleable metal than gold, more metal is needed to make silver tesserae than gold tesserae. Further, silver tesserae are less long-lasting: the top layer of glass covering the silver, the *cartellina*, is more likely to fall off than it is on gold tesserae, and the silver falls with it or tarnishes.<sup>13</sup> So quite possibly, silver tesserae cost more than gold. Certainly technically, they were harder to make and more likely to fall to pieces. In other words, the materials used at sixth-century 'provincial' Kiti suggest that the very sophisticated mosaic there employed resources that were costly but relatively obtainable. In contrast, these materials were unavailable in ninth-century Constantinople and, since it is presumed that it is unlikely that an emperor could not afford whatever was needed, this must have been for reasons other than cost. This idea is supported by the problems at Hagia Sophia with tesserae of another colour: white. That the white tesserae found in the apse mosaics of Hagia Sophia are almost all made of stone reflects another technical problem. At some point, though it is not certain when, the glass employed in mosaics in the Byzantine Empire was opacified with quartz, a cheaper and more easily-obtainable alternative. One of the results of this technical change was that white glass is almost impossible to make with a quartz opacifier, implying that the mosaicists at Hagia Sophia had no access to white glass, though it was available elsewhere in the medieval world.<sup>14</sup>

All of this hints at a shortage of materials in Hagia Sophia and raises a wider material point. It is one that is not considered as often as it might be when the materials of objects and their meanings are considered. Artists can only make an image, a work of art, an object, from the materials and colours they have available. If they do not have access to a colour or a material, for whatever reason, then it cannot be used. It is an issue that is particularly true for each of these mosaics in the context of available colours. Choices in making works of art were made not only from freedom but also from necessity: a medium or colour or material was used in the first instance because it could be. In this way, matter produces meaning in the most concrete fashion possible. With mosaics, the availability of materials and of colours is something that did affect the appearance of the completed piece. Ann Terry and Henry Maguire have demonstrated this very well in their study of the sixth-century mosaics from Poreč in Croatia. Here, among other choices borne of material need, the appearance of the mosaics in the side chapels is clearly the result of the mosaicists running out of glass and making do with what they could find.<sup>15</sup>

This has a knock-on effect for understanding of the symbolism of materials and colours. In Byzantium, in contrast to the medieval West, glass itself does not appear to have been highly valued as a medium either in itself or in a symbolic sense.<sup>16</sup> Colours did matter, however.<sup>17</sup> The difference in colours between the red Mother of God at Kiti and the blue Mother of God at Hagia Sophia may have been a

matter of deep theological significance (at Kiti, she is designated *Hagia Maria*, *Holy Mary*, but in Hagia Sophia there is no inscription). But it may also have been the result of not being able to get red for Hagia Sophia, or of a change in fashion in colours, which then, after the event, could be glossed in terms of its significance. Red only indicated the blood of Christ if it could be both made and used; if it could not be manufactured, then another colour, even another medium, had to take on that symbolic role. Giving the Kiti angels their silver haloes and their gorgeous peacock-eye wings likewise, whilst Gabriel has grey and white feathered wings, may also have reflected the symbolic nature of these colours, but it additionally reveals something of the materials available. Whilst it has been recognised that medieval colour symbolism is relatively unfixed and changing depending on its context and audience – gold can be both the colour of spirituality and a sign of avarice and material greed –, it may be that part of the reason for the flexibility of that symbolism related to material matters of the most fundamental sort: what the artist and patron could get their hands on. So what came first, the material or the meaning? A reliquary was a reliquary because it held relics. But an object might be converted to use as a reliquary because of its value, not its immediate appropriateness. What people had is what they used and that, before anything, conditioned both the appearance and the material properties of an object.

So, if materiality matters, we have to know about materials. The appearance of a work of art was dictated as much by what an artist had available to use as by any concerns of symbolism and iconography. What this means for Gabriel is that he was made from white stone and gold mosaic because he could not be made from white, silver or red glass. But that is not to say that in the hands of the skilful artist, these colours and these media could not carry an impact and convey meaning. Technically, what is really clever about the figure of the angel is how his appearance can change, that the way in which he was made and the use of shiny glass and matt stone together enabled the artists to create, however fortuitously, an image that matched the idea of the insubstantial, transient, mutable, incorporeal yet corporeal beings that angels were believed to be.<sup>18</sup> At times the angel almost vanishes into the gold background and at others he is very much there and present. The use of expanses of shimmering gold glass on the chlamys, the shoulder and the cuffs of the angel's garments, for example, as well as in his hair, can cause his face and the white of the chlamys, both modelled from muted stone, to appear dull and almost grey. At this point, the angel both merges into the gold background and emerges from it. He appears almost two-dimensional, flat, and weightless: the sense of a body, of limbs under the garments is lost; there seems to be no moulding of the clothing to the bodily form of the angel.<sup>19</sup> In other lights, when the brilliance and reflectance of the gold does not dominate, the figure appears more modelled, a sense of a living being beneath the robes, the form that of materiality clothing divine matter, the angel's divine nature outlined and given shape by his earthly garments. Even the background of the mosaic helps in the effects, moving and reflecting as the lighting changes. A solid gold sheet of mosaic becomes flat, slick and dead; to break up the monotony and instil a bit of life and movement into it, the mosaicists mixed silver in with the gold, and laid tesserae on their sides and back, gold side down. The mosaic as a whole is an object mediated by its materials, one where meanings and what was available were mingled together. However, the image is also a point where human and divine come together, where matter and faith meet to make the celestial a perceptible reality. Gabriel and his once-companion, the archangel Michael (only his foot, staff and wing-tips are left), flank the Mother of God bearing her Child on her lap. These mosaics can be dated with some certainty and remarkable precision – for mosaics – to a date between 866 and

March 29<sup>th</sup> 867.<sup>20</sup> The dates also indicate that these mosaics seem to have been the first monumental images restored into Hagia Sophia after the end of Iconoclasm. As such, they were both a political and a religious statement, celebrating the restoration of religious images in Orthodox Christian worship. In this context, it is clear that all four figures were chosen to encapsulate in very similar, but not identical, ways the arguments of the Iconophiles about the nature and validity of religious images.

To summarise very broadly the main points of the Iconoclast Dispute, the arguments for and against religious images.<sup>21</sup> The Iconoclasts believed that religious images were false, blasphemous and hated by God. Their basic argument was that an image of Christ did not represent Christ. The incomprehensible Son of God could not be painted through dishonoured matter and lifeless portraits should not be worshipped; images were inanimate matter and it was not right that the veneration due to God should be offered to such lifeless things. Indeed, it was idolatry, a breaking of the Second Commandment, and those who worshipped images were using the ‘vulgar art of the pagans’ to create idols.<sup>22</sup> Part of the problem for the Iconoclasts was that they could not accept that impure human hands and base materials – paint, stone, glass, metal – could come together to represent the incomprehensible divine nature of Christ. Art could not convey or contain the divine, and so religious images could not include the part of Christ that was divine – and so they were false, incomplete, heretical. The physical materiality of an image as against the immensity of the divine nature it was supposed to convey were two things that did not go together. The Iconoclasts simply did not believe that man could make a true image of God.

For the Iconoclasts, the materiality of images was a major conceptual stumbling block: materiality and divinity, its portrayal and its reality, did not belong together. The Iconophiles, however, argued that only an idiot would believe that man could create an image of God, who was invisible, incorporeal and without form. But Christ was a different matter: he had been seen and indeed depicted whilst on earth, and so it was possible to create his likeness, a likeness that, because it was an image of Christ, portrayed his visible nature and so contained those elements of both his humanity and divinity that were perceptible. An image of Christ, like the image of a man, could represent the characteristics of his body, but did not live or speak or think. Man could portray Christ and should do so to venerate, not worship, His – Christ’s – image.

It was this debate to which the Patriarch Photios referred in his *Homily* delivered on March 29<sup>th</sup> 867 at the inauguration of the mosaics. For Photios, as he (presumably) stood beneath it, the mosaic in the apse showed:

A virgin mother carrying in her pure arms, for the common salvation of our kind, the common Creator reclining as an infant – that great and ineffable mystery! ... With such exactitude has the art of painting, which is a reflection of inspiration from above, set up a lifelike imitation... You might think her not incapable of speaking... To such an extent have the lips been made flesh by the colours that they appear merely to be pressed together and stilled as in the mysteries, yet their silence is not at all inert neither is the fairness of her form derivatory but rather it is the real archetype.<sup>23</sup>

There are several points to draw from this. One is that ‘the art of painting’ reflects inspiration from above and has exactly set up, using colours – base materials –, a ‘lifelike imitation’ of the Mother and Child. In this way, Photios asserted that art, or skill or even craft, reflecting divine inspiration (and for the Byzantines, God was the

ultimate portraitist, since he created man in his own image), could depict exact and lifelike images – and that his audience could see this for themselves. Because the image was lifelike, it was the real archetype: in other words it was a true, real, accurate representation of Mary the Mother of God. The same was true of her Child, of Christ himself. This was a riposte to the Iconoclast claim that art could not convey the real archetype, only the false image. The very choice of an image of Mary and her Child was itself a visual retort to the Iconophiles. The mosaic portrays Christ, ‘the common Creator reclining as an infant’, the point at which Jesus became visible to humanity through his incarnation on earth. This was done through material means and human hands, but the image, as one of Christ and his Mother, transcended these: materiality transmuted into divinity.

Although Photios never mentioned the angels in his homily, their images were part of the same dispute because of the ways in which the nature of angels was understood.<sup>24</sup> Angels, like God himself, were believed to be immaterial and invisible beings, yet just as Christ became visible in his Incarnation, his birth, so angels became visible to humans on specific occasions – at the Nativity itself, or at the Ascension of Christ, for example. In other words, their depiction flanking Christ and His Mother was not mere decoration or space-filling, nor was it as simple as using them to locate the figures of Mary and Christ in a heavenly space. The angels were there because they too helped to prove that material pictures could convey divine beings; they too showed that materiality could be transmuted into divinity; they were in their turn a visible, material reply to the Iconoclasts. As Nilus Scholasticus put it bluntly in the sixth century, ‘How daring it is to picture the incorporeal. But yet the image leads us up to spiritual recollection of heavenly beings’.<sup>25</sup>

Even though Michael and Gabriel made the divine visible, just as the image of the Incarnate Christ did, there was a significant distinction: Christ incarnate participated in some way in human nature; angels did not.<sup>26</sup> Angels were an interesting class of beings in the Byzantine world, and the image of Gabriel, in making an angel visible, is very much one of those moments when matter and the imagination (or perhaps faith) met. Byzantine theologians construed angels as spiritual and so incorporeal beings – but their incorporeality was relative: they were believed to have spiritual bodies of finer substance than those of men. They were created beings, created by God either before he created the material world or at the same time; they had free will and they could sin: witness the Devil. Their role was to praise God, to fulfil divine commands and to assist the faithful in the struggle against demons, who were understood as evil spirits and even as fallen angels. They were invariably gendered as male (the noun in Byzantine Greek, *ο αγγελος*, is masculine) and yet spoken of as sexless (unlike demons who had physical desires and could take the form of women and of animals). In depicting them, it was necessary to distinguish them from both God and humanity (unlike Christ who had to depict both God and humanity). Angels occupied a sort of middle ground between divine and human, good and evil, and even perhaps between male and female, as well as the middle ground between the material and the immaterial. But since like Christ, angels were apprehended in time and more importantly in place and space (*at the Annunciation in Nazareth*), they could be depicted.

The image of Gabriel offers a very large picture of what the Byzantines believed angels looked like and how they might try and reconcile all of the irreconcilables of these relative incorporeal, created, sexless beings. Gabriel is shown as very tall and broad. He has massive, sweeping, feathered wings. He is beardless, an aspect of male portrayal more usually found either with younger, junior men or with



eunuchs, with full red lips, a fillet restrains his curly hair.<sup>27</sup> He holds an orb and a staff, and he wears a form of dress that includes tunic, chlamys and boots that are almost a version of imperial and court costume. The white overmantle held at the neck and especially the red buskins reserved for emperors, are comparable to the clothes worn by an emperor in the ninth-century mosaic in the narthex of Hagia Sophia. It is, however, a very different form of imperial dress to that worn by other ninth- to tenth-century angels such as those in the Church of the Dormition in Nikaea, who wear the more familiar 'cross your heart' jewelled loros.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, court eunuchs in the tenth century wore chlamydes with golden tablia and tunics with golden ornament on the shoulder, as Gabriel does here.<sup>29</sup>

Although these details do not automatically define the figure as Gabriel, they do share many of the iconographic clues that denote angels in Byzantine imagery.<sup>30</sup> This is different from written accounts, which make it very clear that the appearance of angels was not fixed and constant and that angels were not easily recognised as such. A late ninth- or tenth-century text, the so-called *Narratio* of Hagia Sophia, a text purporting to describe the building of the church, offers two descriptions of angels.<sup>31</sup> One story described an angel resolving the problem of how many windows should be placed in the apse, by appearing to the Master Mason on a Wednesday at the fifth hour and telling him that there should be three, for the Trinity. This angel appeared in the guise of the emperor Justinian, wearing imperial vestments and red buskins and it was not until after the Master Mason had had a testy interview with the emperor himself that it was realised that his visitor had, in fact, been angelic, not human.<sup>32</sup> The other story explained how the master mason's fourteen-year old son was sent to summon the men back to work by a palace eunuch 'clad in a shining robe and with a beautiful face', his cheeks sending out fire.<sup>33</sup> The palace eunuch, of course, turned out to be an angel in disguise. So in this one text, angels took on two very contrasting appearances or concealments, and in neither case was it obvious to the human actor that he was face to face with an angel. This is a recurrent theme in angel stories: often, it is not until afterwards that the humans involved appreciate that they were entertaining angels unawares. But as in the *Narratio*, the two most-often used guises of angels when appearing to men were as emperors or courtiers, and angels were frequently mistaken for eunuchs. A candle-maker in the reign of Michael III was visited by men dressed like court officials, who were, in fact angels; in the *Life* of St Andrew the Fool, angels and eunuchs were explicitly paralleled.<sup>34</sup>

Such stories underline the Byzantine belief in the mirroring of the heavenly and earthly hierarchies; just as angels were the ministers closest to God, so too eunuchs were those officials closest to the emperor.<sup>35</sup> But the *Narratio* and other accounts also allow us a glimpse into physical perceptions of angels: they were described as tall, shining, with blond hair, brilliant white faces, rosy cheeks; they were usually, though not invariably beardless, youthful, handsome. The appearance of an angel surely reflected the Byzantine audience's own experience of what an important and handsome man would look like – as indeed Gabriel does: tall, blond, shining, a white face and rosy cheeks, beardless, the very model of an angel.<sup>36</sup> They made up one Byzantine ideal of perfect male beauty; they also provide the paradigmatic positive appearance of a eunuch as beardless, blond and beautiful, in contrast to the effeminate, fat and greasy eunuchs often satirised in Byzantine literature.<sup>37</sup> It has been suggested that angels and eunuchs alike were given a masculine twist by the depiction of their Adam's apples in art, indicated by a V-shaped line, though such definition is not really apparent in the image of the angel depicted in Hagia Sophia.<sup>38</sup> But the association between angels and eunuchs ensured that whilst angels were on one level

an epitome of manliness, they also possessed a level of ambiguous masculinity, an 'eternal springtime' in their looks.

In passing, it is worth noting that the most obvious iconographic indicator of an angel in Byzantine art is the wings, but that these never seem to feature in textual accounts, where they would surely have been the biggest give-away in spotting the difference between the emperor and an angel or a palace eunuch and an angel. Quite where angels put their wings when disguising themselves remains a mystery.

Since miracle stories and theology both agreed that an angel had no form fully comprehensible to humans, and since their depictions in art vary, it is unsurprising that no stable image of angels existed. This dissonance alludes to the difficult nature of angels; they were a real bridge between mundane reality and spiritual truths otherwise unattainable. A sixth-century epigram by Agathias on a painted image of the archangel Michael encapsulates the pull between materiality and incorporeality:

'Greatly daring was the wax that formed the image of the invisible chief of the angels, incorporeal in the essence of his form. Yet it is not without grace; for a mortal man looking at the image directs his mind to a higher contemplation. His veneration is no longer distracted: imprinting the image in himself, he trembles as if he were present. The eyes encourage deep thoughts, and art is able by means of colours to ferry over the prayer of the mind'.

The wax dared to represent the incorporeal archangel in the semblance of his form; the viewer looking at the image is as if in the angels' presence; art can through colours (materials/base matter) convey the prayer of the mind.<sup>39</sup> Writing about Gabriel in a scene of the Annunciation, the twelfth-century author Theodore Prodromos said something similar: 'You [the artist] are giving speech to the angel you have delineated, having dipped your brush in immateriality', and Theodore's emphasis on animation and lifelikeness in this text are reminiscent of Photios on the Mother of God.<sup>40</sup>

This is perhaps something of what Holly was getting at in suggesting that materiality is the moment when matter and the imagination meet: the image of an angel manifesting the solid reality of the divine. The materiality of Gabriel and the way in which the materials were used allows this image to appear to fluctuate between the material and the immaterial, the corporeal and the incorporeal. As Glenn Peers pointed out, angels keep changing their appearance to fit their company.<sup>41</sup> Everything about the mosaic of Gabriel emphasises his ambivalence: he can appear immaterial or solid enough; his clothes may be imperial, they may be aristocratic; he may be male or eunuch; he may be in heaven or on earth; he may be spirit or matter. This uncertainty mattered in the consideration of Gabriel's role in Hagia Sophia at the moment of his making. The mosaic ensemble, including angels, Christ, and Mary alike, are suspended in space, between heaven and earth. In depicting the Incarnation, the mosaic of the Mother of God and Child needed to convey not only the visible human element of Christ but also, as crucially, his divine nature, an inextricable part of his being. Just as Mary revealed his humanity, so too, the angels, with their reference to the heavenly courts above, expressed his divinity. Just as Christ's presence via an image proved that base materials could be used to create a representation of divinity, so too the angels' presence underlined this. The manifestation of angels in the church was another guarantee of the validity of images for Christian worship, further proof of the defeat of Iconoclasm. Their presence opened the concrete space of the church out into God's realm beyond it.

In 988, the envoys of Vladimir of Kiev supposedly reported back on the Hagia Sophia experience that as the liturgy was celebrated, ‘we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendour or such beauty and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men’, thereby allegedly winning Vladimir over to the Christian faith.<sup>42</sup> The play of light around the angel causes him to move visibly between the two spheres, sometimes shimmering in gold and glittering, a presence emerging from the background, sometimes solidly there in his own right. He was made from base materials to be of this world but not in it, as the Byzantines liked to believe was true of all their religious art. His existence proved that paradox of why materiality matters: that the divine was not immaterial but could be apprehended by humanity. (The end of the story about the boy sent by an angel to summon the labourers back to work is that since the angel had promised to wait for the child to return to Hagia Sophia, the boy was never allowed back in the church and so the angel is there still, guarding the building.)

It was Michael Ann Holly’s claim that materiality be understood as a point where matter and human imagination bump into each other. In the same essay, Holly also wrote: ‘The image is an event in the world, a substance that occasionally is substanceless, evinces tangibility sometimes without physical touch, and even might cunningly illustrate materiality without being material’. But the Byzantines got there first. Writing of a painting of the archangel Michael, the fourteenth-century author Nikephoros Kallistos said: ‘It seems either that the painter has dipped his brush in immateriality to delineate a spirit or else the spirit remains unobserved in his picture, hiding in colours his incorporeal nature. How is it that matter can drag the spirit down and encompass the immaterial by means of colours?’<sup>43</sup> That is, perhaps, the material question.

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion in the special edition of *Gesta*, vol. 51, 1, 2012, edited by A. Kumler and C. Lakey, and the composite essay by M. Rosler, C. Walker Bynum, N. Eaton, M.A. Holly, A. Jones, M. Kelly, R. Kelsey, A. LaGamma, M. Wagner, O. Watson and T. Weddigen, ‘Notes from the Field: Materiality’, *The Art Bulletin* 95, 2013, pp. 10-37.

<sup>2</sup> The ‘era before art’ is Hans Belting’s contested phrase: *Bild und Kult: eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich, 1990, and tr. by E. Jephcott as *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> For example Dominic Janes’ *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* of 1998, Cambridge UP.

<sup>4</sup> As C. Normore, ‘Navigating the World of Meaning’, *Gesta* 51, 2012, pp. 19-34, shows with the St Ursula *nef*/reliquary.

<sup>5</sup> M.A. Holly, ‘Notes from the Field: Materiality’, *The Art Bulletin* 95, 2013, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> C. Mango and E.J.W. Hawkins, ‘The Apse Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul. Report on Work Carried out in 1964’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 19, 1965, pp. 115-148, with the description of the angels at pp. 127-131.

<sup>7</sup> Mango and Hawkins, 1965, p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion in L. James, ‘Byzantine Glass Mosaic Tesserae: some Material Considerations’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 30, 2006, pp. 29-48.

<sup>9</sup> For Basil taking marbles and mosaics from the Church of the Holy Apostles to the Nea Ekklesia and the Church of the Mother of God of the Forum see *The Patria*, 4, 32, trans. by A. Berger, Cambridge, Mass, 2013, pp. 278-279. For Leo VI storing tesserae, *Patria*, 3, p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> For the church and its mosaic: D. Winfield, *Byzantine Mosaic Work. Notes on History, Technique and Colour*, Lefkosia, 2005, who dates it to the fifth century; A.M. Foulis, *The Church of the Panagia Angeloktistos at Kiti near Larnaka*, Nikosia, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> D.J. Barber, I.C. Freestone and K.M. Moulding, ‘Ancient Copper Red Glasses: Investigation and Analysis by Microbeam Techniques’ in A.J. Shortland, I.C. Freestone and T. Rehren (eds.), *From mine to microscope. Advances in the study of ancient technology*. Oxford, 2009, pp. 115-128; R.H. Brill and N.D. Cahill, ‘A Red Opaque Glass from Sardis and Some Thoughts on Red Opaques in General’, *Journal of Glass Studies* 30, 1988, pp. 16-27; I.C. Freestone, C.P. Stapleton and V. Rigby, ‘The Production of Red Glass and Enamel in the Late Iron Age, Roman and Byzantine periods’, in C.

Entwistle (ed.), *Through a Glass Brightly. Studies in Byzantine and Medieval Art and Archaeology presented to David Buckton*, London, 2003, pp. 142-154.

<sup>12</sup> Mango and Hawkins, 1965, p. 119 and p. 129.

<sup>13</sup> Because of the relative melting points of gold, silver and glass.

<sup>14</sup> Discussed by M. Verità and P. Santopadre, 'Analysis of Gold-coloured Ruby Glass Tesserae from Roman Church Mosaics of the 4<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries', *Journal of Glass Studies* 52, 2010, pp. 11-24.

<sup>15</sup> A. Terry and H. Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor: the Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč*, Pennsylvania, 2007, pp. 78-82.

<sup>16</sup> H.L. Kessler, "'They Preach not by Speaking out Loud but by Signifying": Vitreous Arts as Typology', *Gesta* 51, 2011, pp. 55-70.

<sup>17</sup> L. James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art*, Oxford, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> For Byzantine angels, see the important book by G. Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium*, Berkeley and London, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> H. Maguire, 'Style and Ideology in Byzantine Imperial Art', *Gesta* 28, 1990, pp. 217-231, at p. 223 made the point about the dematerialising effect of the gold sheets. However, I am not sure that Mary and the Child are necessarily more 'realistic' or 'naturalistic'. Much depends both on the light and the distance at which the mosaics are seen.

<sup>20</sup> Mango and Hawkins, 1965, pp. 134-147.

<sup>21</sup> There is a great deal of literature on Byzantine Iconoclasm. Most recently, however, see L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca 680-850): the Sources: an Annotated Survey*, Aldershot, 2001; L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680-850: a History*, Cambridge, 2011. For the complexities of the theology, see C. Barber, *Figure and Likeness. On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm*, Princeton, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> 'Vulgar art of the pagans' in depicting the Mother of God comes from the Definition (*Horos*) of the Iconoclastic Council of 754, 277D. Text and tr. in S. Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Constantine V*, Louvain, 1977, p. 79.

<sup>23</sup> Photios, *Homily* 17, 2. Greek text in ed. B. Laourda, *Phōtiou Homiliai*, Thessaloniki, 1959; translation taken from C. Mango, *The Homilies of Photios, Patriarch of Constantinople: Translation and Commentary*, Harvard, 1958, p. 290.

<sup>24</sup> Peers, 2001; on angelic theology, E. Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Antique Christianity*, Oxford, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> *Greek Anthology*, 1, 33: tr. W.R. Paton, revised M.A. Tueller, *The Greek Anthology. Volume I, Books 1-5*, Cambridge Mass., and London, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Peers, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> For which see S. Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society*, London, 2008; M. Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium: Perceptions and Representations in Art and Text*, Basingstoke, 2009, ch. 5.

<sup>28</sup> For the Nikaia angels, see F. Schmitt, *Die Koimesis-Kirche von Nikaia. Das Bauwerk und die Mosaiken*, Berlin, 1927; P.A. Underwood, 'The Evidence of Restorations in the Sanctuary Mosaics of the Church of the Dormition at Nicaea' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 13, 1959, pp. 235-243.

<sup>29</sup> M. Parani, 'Look like an Angel: the Attire of Eunuchs and its Significance within the Context of Middle Byzantine Court Ceremonial', in A. Beihammer, S. Constantinou and M. Parani (eds.), *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean*, Leiden, 2013, pp. 433-463.

<sup>30</sup> See Peers, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> The *Narratio de S. Sophia*, also known as the *Diegesis*, is the fourth in the group of texts making up the *Patria* of Constantinople: see tr. Berger, *Patria*.

<sup>32</sup> *Narratio de S. Sophia* 4, 12; text and tr. in tr. Berger, 2013, pp. 250-252.

<sup>33</sup> *Narratio de S. Sophia* 4, 10; text and tr. in tr. Berger, 2013, pp. 242-247.

<sup>34</sup> Pantaleon, *Encomium in Maximum et Gloriosissimum Michaellem Coelestis Militia Principem*, pp. 26-28, *Patrologia Graeca* 140: 586A-8A: see Peers, 2001, pp. 154-156. *Life of St Andrew the Fool*, L. Rydén (ed. and tr.), Uppsala, 1995.

<sup>35</sup> As the satiric poem of c1100, *Timarion*, suggests at 33.734-736. For text see ed. and tr. R. Romano, *La Satira Bizantina dei secoli XI-XV*, Turin, 1999, p. 154. Also Hatzaki, 2009, pp. 93-94.

<sup>36</sup> Hatzaki, 2009, p. 94 and pp. 100-106.

<sup>37</sup> For which see G. Sidéris, "'Eunuchs of light": Power, Imperial Ceremony and Positive Representations of Eunuchs in Byzantium (4<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD)' in S. Tougher (ed.), *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, London, 2002, pp. 161-175; Tougher, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> By Hatzaki, 2009, pp. 96-99.

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<sup>39</sup> *Greek Anthology* 1, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Theodore Prodromos, poem written for a scene of the Annunciation in the church of the *sebastokrator* Isaac: 'Either the spirit has here taken on the grossness of matter or the colours have been altered in relation to the subject, and the brush, as if it were made of some fine substance, delineates the incorporeal; for the spirit that has been represented seems to be somehow addressing Gabriel's words to the Maiden, reverently and gently (since it is a mystery), yet he does not part his lips ... How reverent are your colours, O painter! For you are giving speech to the angel you have delineated, having dipped your brush in immateriality'. Text in ed. E. Miller, 'Poésies inédites de Théodore Prodrome', *Annuaire de l'Association pour l'encouragement des études grecques* 17, 1883, p. 32; the translation is that of C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453. Sources and Documents*, Toronto, 1974, p. 231.

<sup>41</sup> Peers, 2001.

<sup>42</sup> *The Russian Primary Chronicle Laurentian Text*, tr. and ed. S.H. Cross and O.P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, Cambridge, Mass., 1953, Ch. 108, p. 111.

<sup>43</sup> Text in ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, 'Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 11, 1902, no. 16; tr. by Mango, 1974, p. 231.

Caption: The Archangel Gabriel, mosaic, ninth century, apse of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul (Photo: Liz James)